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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 003147

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [BG](#)  
SUBJECT: CONSPIRACY THEORIES SWIRL IN DHAKA

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Classified By: P/E Counselor D.C. McCullough, reason para 1.4 d.

11. (C) Summary. Last week's garment factory riots, and the sudden illness of President Ahmed, rekindled conspiracy rumors across the spectrum regarding alleged moves to subvert or substantially change the electoral process. The least far-fetched may be that PM Zia would, as an insurance policy against defeat in the polls, engineer her ascent to the presidency before elections. The rumors reflect the country's deep political polarization and popular frustration with the prevailing political dynamics. When Bangladeshis sound us out about mostly civilian "third force" scenarios to save Bangladesh from the "two ladies," it is essential that we continue to reject categorically and clearly any non-democratic or extra-constitutional solution. End Summary.

Democracy Hero: "I Made a Terrible Mistake"

12. (C) LTG (R) Nooruddin Khan is one of a handful of genuine heroes of democracy in Bangladesh. As chief of army staff in 1990, his refusal to save the beleaguered General Ershad from popular agitation forced the dictator to step down and allow free elections. Thus, it is sobering that Khan now says he made a "terrible mistake." At a recent event, he told us that if he had known what the "two ladies" would do to democracy, he would have assumed power for one year and convened a constituent assembly to devise a "real democracy" to prevent the BNP's Khaleda Zia and the AL's Sheikh Hasina from degrading democratic institutions and concepts with their "lust for power and money." If the international community would just send the right signal, he whispered, the BNP and AL would be forced to accept a long-term technocratic caretaker government to get a grip on governance and prepare for proper elections. Asked if he might write an op-ed as a respected figure lamenting the state of democracy in Bangladesh 16 years after his historic act, Khan shook his head, "That would be too dangerous for me." Many civil society leaders echo the view that the "two ladies" have betrayed democracy.

Dueling Theories

13. (C) Conspiracy theories are nothing new in Bangladesh. Whenever something goes terribly wrong -- from terrorism to massive power blackouts -- the two parties routinely blame each other; sometimes they seem to believe it, other times it is obvious posturing. Last week's factory garment riots were no exception. The BNP blamed them on India and the AL, while the AL asserted the BDG organized the mobs to discredit the

opposition.

¶4. (C) Most of the theories relate to the elections expected in January 2007. AL leaders now offer three scenarios:

A) The BNP wins the election by massive rigging, with or without AL participation;

B) The BNP, alarmed by recent private polling showing an AL landslide, finds a pretext to postpone elections by months if not longer to give it time to recover from its current political woes, like rising prices and power shortages. Saber Hussein Chowdhury, Hasina's political secretary, speculated to us that JMB terrorism could conveniently resume during the caretaker government to plunge the country into fear and justify delay or radical changes to the constitution; or

C) The BNP forces President Iajuddin Ahmed to resign and replaces him with Khaleda Zia, either to ensure election rigging, as insurance against retribution after an AL election victory, or as part of a switch to a presidential-style of government. For months, there has been speculation that Zia would move to the presidency after the election to make way for her son to become prime minister. However, after the garment factory riots Sheikh Hasina publicly asserted that President Ahmed's departure for medical treatment in Singapore stemmed from a conspiracy to depose him so that Zia could become president now to "engineer" BNP's re-election, presumably by using her authority to BNP advantage as commander-in-chief during the caretaker government. The BNP, the AL notes, forced B. Chowdhury to resign the presidency in 2002 apparently on a trivial matter, and could easily oblige Ahmed, ostensibly on health grounds, to step down. Also last week, PMO Parliamentary Affairs Advisor S.Q. Chowdhury gave a widely noted TV interview in which he trumpeted the virtues of a

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presidential versus a parliamentary form of government. (Note: Chowdhury has long championed a presidential system and argued that Bangladeshi democracy has evolved beyond the need for a caretaker system. He hailed to us the landslide win of the AL incumbent in the 2005 Chittagong mayoral election as proof that free and fair elections can occur in Bangladesh under an elected government.)

¶5. (C) The BNP has its own conspiracy theories, beyond the AL and India permutations. On May 19, Home Minister of State Babar told PolFSN that an increasingly restive civil society, particularly efforts by micro-credit pioneer Muhammad Yunus and a local NGO to promote "clean candidates" in the next election, could force the BNP-led government to resign if it got the "green light" from the international community. The international community, he worried, may be fed up with corruption and poor governance, and mistakenly decide that a non-BNP government would best serve its interests. He argued that BNP, especially if it could be induced to drop some of its most unsavory characters like Haris Chowdhury, is better able to deal with Islamist extremism and is more open to persuasion than the AL.

¶6. (C) The international community, and especially the USG, appears in several rumors. Proponents of a "third force" solution often say that USG support is critical to their success. Some AL leaders, including probably Sheikh Hasina, suspect the USG backs BNP because of its successes against JMB, while some BNP and especially JI members think the USG backs the AL because of Indian influence and a shared "anti-Muslim" agenda. Part of this is an attempt to manipulate the USG to do something to their benefit to demonstrate "balance," but more importantly there is a broad perception that the USG could if it chose to do so decisively influence the election.

Comment

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17. (C) Conspiracy theories are an inevitable byproduct of Bangladesh's tortured political environment, where history, paranoia, hard-ball politics, and the lack of consensus on basic rules of the game generate great volatility. The theories and rumor-mongering reflect the country's deep political polarization as well as popular frustration with the prevailing political dynamics. Lack of information is another problem; the delay in releasing information about President Ahmed's hospitalization in Dhaka, coinciding with heightened tensions over the garment factory riots, fueled rumors for 36 hours in business and political circles that Ahmed was dead. Ironically, Hasina had earlier dismissed Ahmed as a BNP stooge, which was why she demanded as one of her electoral reforms that he be stripped of his powers during the caretaker regime.

18. (C) Perceived USG influence on the election is a double-edged diplomatic sword. Compared to two years ago, there is relatively little talk now about a "Musharraf" solution for Bangladesh, but it is essential that we continue to reject categorically any non-democratic and extra-constitutional (i.e., third force) solutions.

19. (C) Qazi Farook, the head of the giant Proshika NGO, which the BDG has persecuted on several fronts for its supposedly pro-AL activities, views the AL as only slightly less bankrupt than BNP but is strongly anti-JI; he recognizes that some of the conspiracy theories, like delaying elections, sound far-fetched, "But that's what we thought about rumors that Sheikh Mujib would be killed or that General Ershad would seize power." The BNP should be rattled by recent outbreaks of popular fury at Kansat, Demra, and now the Dhaka garment factories, but unless the AL can start capitalizing politically on BNP misfortunes, we would like to think that the risk-averse BNP would be reluctant to do something as reckless as postponing elections. There is, relatively speaking, some logic to an impending Zia move to the presidency, particularly if she is mindful of the strong anti-incumbency tradition in Bangladesh and if recent events have shaken her confidence; the theory there is that Finance Minister Saifur Rahman, if healthy, or perhaps Law Minister Moudud Ahmed would become PM with Tariq Rahman playing a strong supporting role, perhaps as a deputy prime minister.  
BUTENIS